

A Solemn Warning for All Churches

A Sermon

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“Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white; for they are worthy.”—[Revelation 3:4](#).

MY LEARNED and eminently pious predecessor, Dr. Gill, is of opinion that the different churches spoken of in the Book of Revelation are types of different states through which the church of God shall pass until it comes into the Philadelphia state, the state of love, in which Jesus Christ shall reign in its midst, and afterwards, as he thinks, shall pass into the state of Laodicea, in which condition it shall be when suddenly the Son of Man shall come to judge the world in righteousness and the people in equity. I do not go with him in all his suppositions with regard to these seven churches as following each other in seven periods of time; but I do think he was correct when he declared that the church in Sardis was a most fitting emblem of the church in his days, as also in these. The good old doctor says, “When we shall find any period in which the church was more like the state of Sardis as described here, than it is now?” And he points out the different particulars in which the church of his day (and I am sure it is yet more true of the church at the present day) was exactly like the church in Sardis. I shall use the church in Sardis as a figure of what I conceive to be the sad condition of Christendom at the present moment. My first point will be *general defilement*—there were but “a few names” in Sardis who had not “defiled their garments;” secondly, *special preservation*—there were a few who had not defiled their garments; and thirdly, *a peculiar reward*—“And they shall walk with me in white; for they are worthy.”

I. GENERAL DEFILEMENT. The holy apostle, John, said of the church in Sardis, “These things saith he that hath the Seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou has a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die; for I have not found thy works perfect before God. Remember therefore how thou has received and heard, and hold fast and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee. Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments.”

The first charge of general defilement he brings against the church in Sardis was that they had *a vast deal of open profession*, and but little of sincere religion. “I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.” That is the crying sin of the present age. I am not inclined to be morbid in my temperament, or to take a melancholy view of

the church of God. I would wish at all times to exhibit a liberality of spirit, and to speak as well as I can of the church at large; but God forbid that any minister should shrink from declaring what he believes to be the truth. In going up and down this land, I am obliged to come to this conclusion, that throughout the churches there are multitudes who have “a name to live, and are dead.” Religion has become fashionable. The shopkeeper could scarcely succeed in a respectable business if he were not united with a church. It is reckoned to be reputable and honorable to attend a place of worship; and hence men are made religious in shoals. And especially now that parliament itself doth in some measure sanction religion, we may expect that hypocrisy will abound yet more and more, and formality everywhere take the place of true religion. You can scarcely meet with a man who does not call himself a Christian, and yet it is equally hard to meet with one who is in the very marrow of his bones thoroughly sanctified to the good work of the kingdom of heaven. We meet with professors by hundreds; but we must expect still to meet with possessors by units. The whole nation appears to have been Christianized in an hour. But is this real? Is this sincere? Ah! we fear not. How is it that professors can live like other men? How is it that there is so little distinction between the church and the world? Or, that if there is any difference, you are frequently safer in dealing with an ungodly man than with one who is professedly righteous? How is it that men who make high professions can live in worldly conformity, indulge in the same pleasures, live in the same style, act from the same motives, deal in the same manner as other do? Are not these days when the sons of God have made affinity with the sons of men? And may we not fear that something terrible may yet occur unless God shall send a voice, which shall say, “Come out of them, my people, lest ye be partakers of their plagues?” Take our churches at large—there is no lack of names, but there is a lack of life. Else, how is it that our prayer-meetings are so badly attended? Where is the zeal or the energy shown by the apostles? Where is the Spirit of the living God? Is he not departed? Might not “Ichabod” be written on the walls of many a sanctuary? They have a name to live, but are dead. They have their piety? Where is sincere religion? Where is practical godliness? Where is firm, decisive, puritanical piety? Thank God, there are a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; but charity itself will not allow us to say that the church generally possesses the Spirit of God.

Then the next charge was, that there was *a want of zeal* throughout the church of Sardis. He says, “Be watchful.” He looked on the church and saw the bishops slumbering, the elders slumbering, and the people slumbering; they were not, as once they were, watchful for the faith, striving together and earnestly contending for it, not wrestling against the enemy of souls, labouring to spread their Master’s kingdom, but the apostle saw sleepiness, coldness, lethargy; therefore he said, “Be watchful.” Oh! John, if from thy grave thou couldst start up, and see the church as thou didst at Sardis, having thine eyes anointed by the Spirit, thou wouldst say it is even so now. Ah! we have abundance of cold, calculating Christians, multi-

tudes of professors; but where are the zealous ones? where are the leaders of the children of God? where are your heroes who stand in the day of battle? where are your men who “count not their lives dear unto them,” that they might win Christ, and be found in him? where are those who have an impassioned love for souls? How many of our pulpits are filled by earnest, enthusiastic preachers? Alas! look, at the church. She has builded herself fine palaces, imitating popery; she hath girded herself with vestments; she has gone astray from her simplicity; but she has lost the fire and the life which she once had. We go into our chapels now, and we see everything in good taste: we hear the organ play; the psalmody is in keeping with the most correct ear; the gown and the noble vestments are there, and everything is grand and goodly, and we think that God is honored. Oh for the days when Whitfields would preach on tubs once more, when their pulpits should be on Kennington Common, and their roofs the ceiling of God’s sky. Oh for the time when we might preach in barns again, or in catacombs either, if we might but have the life of God that once they had in such places. What is the use of garnishing the shell when you have lost the kernel. Go and whitewash, for the life is gone. Garnish the outside of your cups and platters; but ye have lost the pure word of God. Ye have it not for a piece of bread; they flinch to speak the whole truth, or if they seem to speak it, it is with cold, meaningless, passionless words, as if it were nothing whether souls were damned or saved, whether heaven were filled or heaven depopulated, or whether Christ should see of the travail of his woud and be satisfied. Do I speak fierce things? I can say as Irving once did, I might deserve to be broken on the wheel if I did not believe what I say to be the truth; for the utterance of such things I might deserve the stake; but God is my witness, I have endeavoured to judge and to speak impartially. With all that universal cant of charity now so prevalent I am at arm’s length; I care not for it. Let us speak of things as we find them. WE do believe that the church has lost her zeal and her energy. But what do men say of us? “Oh! you are too excited.” Good God! excited! when men are being damned; *Excited!* When we have the mission of heaven to preach to dying souls. *EXCITED! preaching too much!* when souls are lost. Why should it come to pass that one man should be perpetually labouring all the week, while others are lolling upon their couches, and preach only upon the Sabbath-day? Can I bear to see the laziness, the slothfulness, the indifference of ministers, and of churches, without speaking. No! there must be a protest entered, and we enter it now. Oh! Church of God, thou has a name to live, and art dead; thou art not watchful. Awake! awake! arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.

The third charge which John brought against Sardis was that they *did not “look to the things that remained and were ready to die.”* I take it that this may related to the poor feeble saints, the true children of God, who were sorrowing, mourning, and groaning in their midst, who were so oppressed with sorrow on account of the state of Sardis, that they were “ready to die.” And what does the church do now? Do the shepherds go after those that are wounded and sick, and those that are weary? Do they carry the lambs in their bosom, and

gently lead those that are with young? Do they see to poor distressed consciences, and speak to those who feel their deadness in trespasses and sins? Yes, but how do they speak? They tell them to do things they cannot do—to perform impossible duties—instead of “strengthening the things that remain and are ready to die” In how much contempt are the truly new-born children of God held in these times! They are called peculiar men, scouted as Antinomians, hissed at as being oddities, high doctrine men who have departed from the usual mode of pulling down God’s word to men’s fancies; they are called bigots, narrow-minded souls, and their creed is set down as dry, hard, rough, severe Calvinism. God’s gospel called hard, rough, and severe! The things for which our fathers died are not called infamous things! Mark whether, if ye stand out prominently in the truth, you will not be abhorred and scouted. If you go into a village, and hear of poor people who are said to be doing a deal of mischief, are they not the people who understand most of the gospel? Go and ask the minister who are the persons that he most dislikes? and he will say, “We have a nasty lot of Antinomians here.” What does he mean by that? Men who love the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and will have it, and are therefore called a nasty set of Antinomians. Ah! we have lost what once we had. We do not now “strengthen the things that remain and are ready to die;” they are not looked after as they ought to be, not beloved, not fostered. The salt of the earth are now the offscouring of all things; men whom God has loved, and who have attained a high standing in godliness—these are the men who will not bow the knee to Baal, and who therefore are cast into the fiery furnace of persecution and slander. O Sardis! Sardis! I see thee now. Thou hast defiled thy garments. Thank God, there are a few who have not followed the multitude to do evil, and who shall “walk in white, for they are worthy.”

Another charge which God has brought against the church is, that *they were careless about the things which they heard*. He says, “Remember, therefore, how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast; and repent.” If I am wrong upon other points, I am positive that the sin of this age is impurity of doctrine, and laxity of faith. Now you know you are told every Sunday that it does not signify what you believe; that all sects and denominations will be saved; that doctrines are unimportant things; that as to the doctrines of God’s grace, they are rather dangerous than otherwise, and the less you inquire about them the better; they are very good things for the priests, but you common people cannot understand them. Thus they keep back a portion of the gospel with cautious reserve; but having studied in the devil’s new Jesuitical college, they understand how to call themselves particular Baptists, and then preach general doctrines, to call themselves Calvinists, and preach Arminianism, telling the people that it does not signify whether they preach damnable heresies instead of the truth of God. And what do the congregations say? “Well, he is a wise man, and ought to know.” So you are going back into as bad a priestcraft as ever. Presbyter has become priest written large, and minister has become priest in many a place because persons do not search for

themselves and endeavour to get hold of the truth of God. It is everywhere proclaimed that we are all right; that though one says God loved his people from before the foundation of the world, and the other that he did not; though one says that God is changeable and turns away from his people, and the other, that he will hold them fast to the end; though the one says that the blood of Christ avails for all for whom it was shed and the other, that it is inefficacious for a large number of those for whom he died; though one says that the works of the law are in some measure necessary, or at any rate that we must endeavour to improve what we have, and then we shall get more, while the other says, that “by grace we are saved through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God,” yet both are right. A new age this, when falsehood and truth can kiss each other! New times these when fire and water can become friendly! Glorious times these when there is an alliance between hell and heaven, though God knows, we are of vastly different families. Ah! now, who cares for truth except a few narrow-minded bigots as they are called. Election—*horrible!* Predestination—*awful!* Final perseverance—*desperate!* Yet, turn to the pages of the Puritans, and you will see that these truths were preached every day. Turn to the Fathers; read Augustine, and you will see that these were the truths for which he would have bled and died. Read the Scriptures, and if every page is not full of them I have not read them aright, or any child of God either. Ay, laxity of doctrine is the great fault now; we solemnly protest against it. You may fancy that I am raising an outcry about nothing at all. Ah! no; my anxious spirit sees the next generation—what will that be. *This* generation—Arminianism. What next? Pelagianism. And what next? Popery. And what next? I leave you to guess. The path of error is always downward. We have taken one step in the wrong direction; God knows where we shall stop. If there had not been sturdy men in ages gone by, the Lord would not have left to us a remnant even now; all grace must have died, and we had become like unto Gomorrah and unto Sodom. Oh, church of the living God, awake! awake! Once more write truth upon thy banner; stamp truth upon thy sword; and for God and for his word, charge home. Ye knights of truth, and truth alone, shall sit king over the whole world!

But now I have lifted up the whip, I must have another lash. Look on any section of the church you like to mention, not excepting that to which I belong; and let me ask you whether they have not defiled their garments. Look at the church of England. Her articles are pure and right in most respects; yet see how her garments are defiled. She hath made the Queen her Head instead of God; she bows before the state, and worships the golden calf that is set up before her. Look at her abominations, her pluralities, her easy living bishops doing nothing; look at her ungodly clergymen in the country, living in sin. The churchman who does not know that his church has defiled her garments is partial to his mother, as indeed he ought to be, but he is too partial to speak the truth. But good churchmen themselves weep, because what I say is true. Then look at John Wesley’s body; have not they defiled their garments? See how they have lately been contending with a despotism as accursed as

any that ever brooded over the slaves in America? See how they have been rent in sunder, and how imperfect in doctrine they are too after all, professedly at least, not holding the truth of God. Look into what denomination you please, Independent, or Baptist, or any other—have they not all defiled their garments in some way or other? Look at the churches around, and see how they have defiled their garments by giving baptism to those who whom it was never intended, and degrading a holy church ordinance to become a mere sop with which they feed their babes. And see how they have taken away Christ's honor, how they have taken the bread that was meant for the children, and cast it to ungodly persons. Look at our own denomination: see how it has deserted the leading truths of the gospel. For a proof hereof, I refer you to hundreds of our pulpits. Oh church of God! I am but a voice crying in the wilderness, but I must cry still, "How art thou fallen from heaven, thou son of the morning! how art thou fallen!" "Remember how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent." If thou dost not watch, thy Master will come upon thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know in what hour he will come unto thee.

II. But now we come to far easier work; not because we would shun what we conceive to be our duty, even at the expense of offending many now present, but because we always delight to speak well if we can. "Thou has a few names even in Sardis that have not defiled their garments." He we have SPECIAL PRESERVATION. Mark, "Thou hast a few names." Only a few; not so few as some think, but not as many as others imagine! A few compared with the mass of professors; a few compared even with the true children of God, for many of *them* have defiled their garments. They were but a few, and those few were even I Sardis. There is not a church on earth that is so corrupt but has "a few." You who are always fighting so much for your denomination, you think other denominations are Sardis; but there are a few even in Sardis. Even if the denomination is the worst of all Protestant sections, there are a few in Sardis; and perhaps that is as much as we can say of our denomination: so we will treat them all alike. There are a few in Sardis—mark that. Not in what you conceive to be Philadelphia, your own blessed church, but in Sardis—there are a few there. Where there is heresy and false doctrine, where there are many mistakes about rites and ceremonials, there are a few there; and even where they cringe before the state, there are a few there—ay, and a goodly few too, a few whom we love, with whom we can hold communion. This makes us severe against the whole body, but it makes us very loving towards all the dear people of God everywhere. There are a few even in Sardis. Well, when I meet a brother who lives in Sardis, I will hope he is one of the few; and when you meet such, do you say, "Ah! well, I know my brother comes out of a bad church, but there are a few in Sardis, and very likely he is one of them." That is the kind of charity God loves; not the universal charity which says Sardis is all right, but that which says, some in her are sincere. We stand this morning like old Elijah, when he stood before God and said, "I, only I, am left, and they seek my life." But God whispers, "I have yet reserved unto myself seventy thousand that have not bowed

the knee to Baal.” Take heart, Christian, there are a few in Sardis—do not forget that—who have not defiled their garments. Take heart. It is not all rotten yet; there is a soundness in the core after all; there is “a remnant according to the election of grace;” there is “salt,” and for the sake of that salt, many who have defiled their garments in a measure will be saved. They will enter into heaven even as these few will; but unto the few there will be special honor and special blessing. Take heart then; and whenever you go to your chamber and mourn over the sad condition of the church, think you hear that good old woman in her closet groaning and crying; think you hear that minister faithfully dispensing the word; think you see that valiant deacon standing up for God’s truth; think you see that young man strong in the midst of temptation; think of these few in Sardis, and they will cheer you. Do not be quite downcast. Some heroes have not turned their backs in the day of battle; some mighty men still fight for the truth. Be encouraged; there are a few in Sardis. But be careful, for perhaps you are not one of the few. Since there are but a few, there ought to be great searchings of heart. Let us look to *our* garments and see whether they be defiled. If they be not, we shall walk in white, for we are worthy through Jesus. Be active; be prayerful. The fewer the workmen to do the work the greater reason is there that you should be active. Be instant in season and out of season, because there are so few. Oh! if we had hundreds behind us, we might say, “Let *them* do the work;” but if we stand with only a few, how should each of those few rush hither and thither! A city is besieged: it is full of inhabitants; half of them are asleep; the others watch the walls, and thus they relieve each other. Another city has but a few defenders: see how that champion rushes first to that breach and routs the enemy; now he brings his might to another place; a bastion is assaulted, and he is there; now a postern is attacked—there he is with all his force behind him; he is here, he is there, he is everywhere, because he feels there is but a handful of men who can gather round him. Take courage, take heart; stir yourselves up to the sternest activity, for verily there are but a few in Sardis who have not defiled their garments. Above all, be prayerful. Put up your earnest cries to God that he would multiply the faithful, that he would increase the number of chosen ones who stand fast, that he would purify the church with fire in a furnace seven times heated, so that he might bring out her third part through the fire; cry unto God that the day may come when the much fine gold shall be no longer dim, when the glory shall again return unto Zion. Beg of God to remove the cloud, to take away “the darkness that may be felt.” Be doubly prayerful, for there are but a few in Sardis who have not defiled their garments.

III. This brings us to the third point, which is a PECULIAR REWARD. “They shall walk in white, for they are worthy.” The attentive reader will observe, that in quoting the passage just now, I left out two of the sweetest words in the passage. It reads: “They shall walk *with me* in white, for they are worthy.” That is the very pith of the honor; if the rest of it be gold this is the jewel. “They shall walk *with me* in white.” That is to say, communion with Christ on earth shall be the special reward of those who have not defiled their garments. Now, I

must say a very hard thing again, but it is a true one. Go into what company you please, do you meet with many men who hold communion with Christ? Though they may be godly men, upright men, ask them if they hold communion with Christ, and will they understand you? If you give them some of those sweetly spiritual books, that those who hold fellowship love to read, they will say they are mystical, and they do not love them. Ask them whether they can spend an hour in meditation upon Christ, whether they ever rise to heaven and lay their head on the breast of the Saviour, whether they ever know what it is to enter into rest and get into Canaan; whether they understand how he has raised us up together and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus; whether they can often say,

Abundant sweetness while I sing
Thy love, my ravish'd heart o'erflows;
Secure in thee my God and King
Of glory that no period knows."

Ask them that, and they will say, "We don't comprehend you." Now, the reason of it is in the first part of my sermon—they have defiled their garments, and therefore Christ will not walk with them. He says, "Those that have not defiled their garments shall walk *with me*." Those who hold fast the truth, who take care to be free from the prevailing sins of the times, "These," he says, "shall walk *with me*; they shall be in constant fellowship *with me*; I will let them see that I am bone of their bone, and flesh of their flesh: I will bring them into the banqueting-house; my banner over them shall be love; they shall drink wine on the lees well refined; they shall have the secrets of the Lord revealed unto them, because they are the people who truly fear me: they shall walk *with me* in white." Oh, Christian! if thou wouldst have communion with Christ, the special way to win it is by not defiling thy garments, as the church has done.

But we must dwell on the rest of the passage. "They shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy." A good old author says there is a reference here to that fact, that the rabbis allowed persons to walk in white who could trace their pedigree without a flaw; but if they found any blot on their escutcheon, and could not trace their birth up to Abraham, they were not allowed to walk in white on certain days. Well, he says he thinks the passage means that those who have not defiled their garments will be able to prove their *adoption*, and will walk in white garments as being sure they are the sons of God. If we would be certain that we are the people of God, we must take care that we have no blots on our dress, for each one of those splatterings of the mire of this earth will cry out, and say "Perhaps you are not a child of God." Nothing is such a father of doubts as sin; sin is the very mother of our distress. He who is covered with sin must not expect to enjoy full assurance, but he who liveth close to his God, and keeps his garments unspotted from the world—he shall walk in white, knowing that his adoption is sure.

But chiefly we should understand this to refer to *justification*. “They shall walk in white;” that is, they shall enjoy a constant sense of their own justification by faith; they shall understand that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to them, that they have

A matchless robe which far exceeds
What earthly princes wear;”

that they have been washed and made whiter than snow, and purified and made more cleanly than wool.

Again, it refers to *joy and gladness*: for white robes were holiday dresses among the Jews. They that have not defiled their garments, shall have their faces always bright; they shall understand what Solomon meant when he said, “Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart. Let thy garments be always white, for God hath accepted thy works.” He who is accepted of God shall wear white garments, being received by the Father—garments of joy and gladness. Whence so many doubts, so much distress, and misery, and mourning? It is because the church has defiled her garments; they do not here below walk in white, because they are not worthy.

And lastly, it refers to *walking in white before the throne of God*. Those who have not defiled their garments here, shall most certainly walk in white up yonder, where the white-robed hosts sing perpetual hallelujahs to the Most High. If thou hast not defiled thy garments, thou mayest say, “I know whom I have believed;” not for my works, not by way of merit, but as the reward of grace. If there be joys inconceivable, happiness beyond a dream, bliss which imagination knoweth not, blessedness which even the stretch of desire hath not reached, thou shalt have all these: thou shalt walk in white, since thou art worthy. Christ shall say to thee “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”

But what shall be done with such persons as live in the church, but are not of it having a name to live, but are dead? What shall be done with mere professors who are not possessors? What shall become of those who are only outwardly religious but inwardly are in the gall of bitterness? We answer, as good Calvin did once: “They shall walk in black, for they are unworthy.” They shall walk in black—the blackness of God’s destruction. They shall walk in black—the blackness of hopeless despair. They shall walk in black—the blackness of incomparable anguish. They shall walk in black—the blackness of damnation. They shall walk in black for ever, because they were found unworthy. O professors, search yourselves. O ministers, search yourselves. O ye, who make a profession of religion now, put your hands within your hearts, and search your souls. You live in the sight of a rein-trying God. Oh! try your own reins, and search your own hearts. It is not a matter of half-importance for which I plead, but a matter of double importance. I beseech you, examine and cross-examine your own souls, and see whether ye be in the path, for it will go ill with you if ye shall find at last that ye were in the church, but not of it, that ye make a profession of religion, but it was only a cloak for your hypocrisy—if ye should have entered into his courts below, and

be shut out of the courts above. Remember, the higher the pinnacle of profession the direr your fall of destruction. Beggared kings, exile princes, crownless emperors, are always subjects of pity. Professor, what wilt thou think of thyself when thy robes are taken from thee, when thy crown of profession is taken from thy head, and thou standest the hiss of even vile men, the scoff of blasphemers, the jeer of those who, whatever they were, were not hypocrites, as thou art? They will cry to thee, “Art thou become like one of us? Thou professor, thou high-flying man, art thou become like one of us?” And ye will hide your guilty heads in the dark pit of perdition, but all in vain, for you never will be able to avoid that hiss which shall ever greet you. “What! *thou!*” the drunkard whom you told to drink no more will say “Art *thou* become like one of us?” And the harlot whom you scorned, and the young debauched man whom you warned, will stare you in the face, and say, “What! you! You who talked of religion. A pretty fellow you were! Art thou become one of us?” Oh! I think I hear them saying in hell, “Here’s a parson, come here; here’s a deacon; here’s a church member; here’s a man who has had the sacramental wine within his lips; here’s a man that has had the baptismal water on his garments.” Ah! take care. There are but a few names in Sardis who shall walk in white. Be ye of that few. May God give you grace that ye be not reprobates, but may be accepted of the Lord in that day! May he give you mercy, that when he severs the chaff from the wheat, you may abide as the good corn, and may not be swept away into unquenchable fire! The Lord in mercy bless this warning, and hear our supplication, for Christ’s sake. Amen.